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U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary

TOWARD A BROADER MISSION
FOR THE SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE

I am very glad for the opportunity to meet with you today. You are the people who turn soil conservation policies into action in the field. Your understanding and support make our policies succeed.

Your backgrounds and mine are somewhat different. Many of you have a lifetime career in this one agency. As a result, you bring an awesome amount of knowledge and experience to your present positions.

Whatever your education--and you do have varied academic backgrounds--your training and experience in the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) have transformed you into multidisciplinary soil and water conservationists.

Career agencies like SCS and the Forest Service have proven the value of developing a skilled and highly-motivated cadre of professionals to carry out large and complex resource programs. You in SCS very effectively administer public funds totaling more than half a billion dollars a year. That says much for a career service.

My own formal education was in wildlife management and resource development. I did my doctoral research on Forest Service litigation and its impact on policy. I have been employed variously as a writer and editor, as a association executive, as a state government resource manager, and as a university professor.

Although you and I have traveled different paths, we share a strong commitment to natural resource conservation. The conservation and management of all natural resources is essential to our survival as a nation. I believe the future of an America worth living in depends on a proper balance among all resource values.

Remarks by M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, at the annual meeting of Soil Conservation Service state conservationists, Lake Buena Vista, Florida, September 17, 1979

With each position I have held, my personal definition of what conservation entails has broadened. So has the definition of conservation as practiced by the Soil Conservation Service.

The mission of SCS today is much broader than when the agency began. And it will be broader in the future.

Forty-four years have passed since Hugh Hammond Bennett's congressional testimony on the soil erosion problem was dramatically accompanied by the arrival of sky-darkening clouds of dust. It was the second time in a year that yellow silt from the wind-ravaged fields of the Great Plains had settled on the buildings and streets of the nation's capital.

Congress galvanized into action and established the Soil Conservation Service in April of 1935. Two years later the establishment of local soil and water conservation districts was in full swing.

Today nearly 3,000 conservation districts cover 99 percent of the nation's farms and ranches. You have won the confidence of farm, ranch and forest operators, district officials, and state and local governments. You have provided technical assistance to more than 2 million farmers, ranchers and other cooperators. As a result, 34 percent of the total nonfederal land in the country--more than 400 million acres--is adequately protected from erosion by soil conservation practices.

Last year alone you provided technical services to 245,000 land users participating in the Agricultural Conservation Program and Water Bank. One-fourth of all state and local governments obtained services from your professional staffs.

You can point with a sense of accomplishment to large numbers of operating units where resource management and conservation treatment have been adapted to each kind of soil. You can take pride in the number of farms using terracing, contouring and stripcropping, various forms of conservation tillage, and improved irrigation and drainage.

Today the SCS mission grows ever more complex. In an increasingly industrialized society, we have learned slowly and painfully that all of our natural resources and all the various forms of life on planet earth are interdependent. None can be altered without having an impact on others. You and I have learned this truth through our varied experience as conservationists.

We share a tremendous public responsibility. The Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service is the principal action agency in the field of natural resources conservation on nearly two-thirds of America's lands--that portion which is owned privately. You have no serious competitor for this role--and that's the way it ought to continue. True, some SCS practices have been debated and some SCS priorities have been questioned. Yet your basic role and your technical expertise never have been challenged. Your record of accomplishment draws the respect and admiration of everybody who works with you.

You certainly have earned my personal respect and high regard--and that of Secretary Bergland--for your record of past accomplishments and your ability and willingness to respond to change. You are well on your way toward adapting your programs to the needs of the 1980's.

It is not easy to change, and there have been many important changes in law and policy in recent years--and in recent months.

You have responded to new laws and guidelines quickly and constructively. You have helped make sure that the new policies are carried out and that they work. I want to thank you for the way you have done your job. In so many instances, you have gone beyond the call of duty.

The reputation of SCS was built on tangible accomplishment. One reason that your agency has been able to accomplish so much is that the pioneers of soil conservation knew how to talk to people in words they could understand.

When Hugh Bennett gave a speech, he talked about gullies and "gully washers;" about poor people who couldn't make enough money to pay the interest on their loans; about the value of crop rotation and planting on the contour. No one--man, woman, or child--was ever in doubt about what he was trying to say.

Today some of us are talking less like Bennett and more like bureaucrats or lawyers. We are forever citing statutes; many of the 215 million people who do not work for the Department of Agriculture have no idea what we are talking about.

We don't build earthen dams any more. We finance P.L. 566 projects.

We no longer clean up after floods. We perform 216 work.

We don't try to keep sediment out of water. We apply BMP's in 208 areas.

Apart from bewildering the public, there is another danger in this kind of statutory jargon.

If we think in terms of statutes we inevitably think in terms of what can't be done, instead of what needs to be done or can be done. We approach our work with blinders on, and the public is wary.

We would all do better to think and talk in terms of current problems and innovative solutions instead of laws and sections of law.

We need to talk more about the Agriculture Department as the "people's department." For many Americans, USDA still stands for just one thing: agricultural production.

You and I know that three-fourths of the department's budget is allocated to programs for the conservation and management of natural resources, for improved nutrition, and other activities that benefit all consumers, all citizens.

We also know that 62 percent of the conservation technical assistance provided by SCS last year went to small farmers, disadvantaged farmers and minority farmers, including American Indians.

Too many people in and out of government think SCS gives the lion's share of its assistance to wealthy, powerful farmers who can afford to apply expensive conservation systems. The record needs to be set in order.

We also need to help many more Americans--private citizens, government officials and district leaders--take a broader view.

Hugh Bennett's dream of a "permanent agriculture--an agriculture that maintains the goodness of the land (and) its capacity to produce rewardingly"--was focused primarily on restoring the land, controlling soil erosion, and reducing flooding.

Today we know that a permanent agriculture requires more than the accomplishment of those objectives. We know that we must restore and maintain all of our natural resources--an objective requiring full use of all the sciences.

If there is one awareness that is prevalent in the present generation, it is a consciousness of man's interaction with the dependence on natural resources.

Harmony between man and nature is absolutely essential to the survival of mankind. We cannot have a permanent agriculture that will meet society's needs unless we keep all of our natural resources at a high level of productivity.

Land is important. It undergirds all the other resources. But improving the land is not enough.

We must also intensify our efforts to improve all other natural resources as well. Just as the death of a canary in a Cornish mine signalled gas, the loss of an endangered species sends a shudder through mankind--or ought to--as a signal of a weakened global ecosystem.

We must not be found guilty of contributing to a reduction in the essential diversity of life forms and habitats on this planet.

We need to restore a balance between water use and recharge.

Agriculture uses four times as much water to produce food and fiber than is used for all other purposes combined. And water shortages have been identified in 70 percent of the nation's hydrologic regions.

Dependable supplies of water are only part of our water needs for a permanent agriculture. We also require water of sufficiently high quality.

Agriculture is the most widespread cause of nonpoint source pollution of America's waters--from field or feedlot runoff and from irrigation return flows. Runoff means more infectious agents in water; more suspended solids; more nutrients, and more pesticides. Return flow means more dissolved solids and more nutrients. Polluted waters mean more insects, including those that transmit diseases. Polluted waters make recreation impossible.

Energy needs and uses also must receive our close attention.

Agricultural production may use only 3 percent of the energy consumed in the United States--but agriculture is extremely dependent on energy. At the moment, it relies heavily on gasoline and diesel fuels, which account for three-fifths of farm energy supplies.

President Carter has placed this administration firmly in support of the most massive peacetime commitment of funds and other resources in our nation's history for the development of alternative sources of energy--coal, oil, shale, manufactured gas, solar power, low-head hydropower, and biomass production for direct combustion and gasohol.

Biomass production for energy adds an important new function for agriculture and forestry--one that the SCS must watch closely and assist constructively.

Current economic analyses indicate the most likely sources of biomass raw material are crop and forest residues and animal wastes that have little or no current value. If energy prices rise high enough, however, demand for energy raw materials could include field crops and timber supplies.

We do not yet know the impact of biomass energy production on land and water use and on natural resources conservation. It is a proper area of concern for all of us.

We must push forward with research and technology transfer programs to stimulate biomass production for energy. But we must do so in ways that sustain natural resource productivity.

Some crop and forest residues, for example, must be left to retard erosion and assure nutrient cycling. President Carter has pledged his administration to being "sensitive both to energy needs and environmental considerations."

I believe this balanced position reflects the prevailing attitude of most Americans.

We also must have a bold program of energy conservation. Agriculture and forestry can take a leadership role.

Use of conservation tillage on 70 percent of the tilled cropland can result in estimated net energy savings of 135 million gallons of fuel, and net dollar savings of \$47 million a year. Better irrigation practices, integrated pest management, preservation of prime farmland, improved management of pasture and range, and other measures can conserve energy, too.

The importance of improving pasture and range resources transcends the issues of energy.

There are more than 800 million acres of rangeland in the United States, including more than half a billion acres that are privately owned.

These lands provide the principal source of forage for thousands of cattle and sheep operations, many of them small and family owned.

They also form a vast national treasure of wildlife, recreation, water resources, and historical sites.

They have a great potential for producing higher and lasting returns for the rancher and for all Americans if:

- o Principles of coordinated resource planning and multiple use management are followed.

- o If we do something about the 54 percent of the rangelands that are in poor condition or worse.

- o If we do something about brush encroachment and wind erosion.

- o If we give range management the added emphasis, the equal billing it deserves and needs.

Another national resource is diminishing with each passing year. That is America's important farmlands.

Some of you already have begun information campaigns on this topic, and have stepped up cooperation with land users, mining firms, local and state governments, and coordination through our land use committees.

This is a subject that has the deep personal commitment and excellent leadership of your new administration. The loss of farmland to nonfarm uses currently is being investigated through a joint Agriculture Department and the Council on Environmental Quality study. The study is to be completed by the beginning of 1981 and findings submitted to the President.

As we seek ways to protect farmlands from nonfarm encroachment, so must we protect wetlands.

Our nation's wetlands, now reduced to 70.5 million acres, are by far our most productive wildlife lands. But their value goes beyond that. Wooded swamps and seasonally flooded hardwood forests are very important commercially.

Unfortunately, by 1970, two-thirds of the original 24 million acres of bottomland hardwoods in the Delta region had been cleared and converted to crop production. And another quarter of a million acres are being lost every year.

Wetlands also have important hydrologic values. They reduce flood peaks, and maintain stream flow in spring and fall. They improve water quality by serving as nutrient traps. They remove suspended sediment from water.

Despite these important values, the nation has been losing an average of 500,000 acres of wetlands a year through draining, filling, or conversion to other uses. Indications are that this average annual wetland loss has been reduced in recent years to about 300,000 acres. But while this reduction is encouraging, any loss is unacceptable. The Soil Conservation Service must seek actively to reverse the trend.

Closely associated with wetland values are the benefits of riparian vegetation--the woody vegetation and other components of the plant communities along flood plains of streams and rivers. Riparian vegetation in the arid and semi-arid western states is unequaled as essential habitat for fish and wildlife.

Up to 80 percent of the breeding birds and 75 percent of the fish species in the southwest depend on riparian ecosystems. These ecosystems are being reduced by control of water plants, projects to widen, deepen and straighten channels, and improper grazing of livestock. You can help protect riparian vegetation through the use of our new channel modification guidelines developed with the help of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Dams, levees, dredging, and channel modification have been our traditional approaches to water management.

Public awareness of the generally adverse ecological consequences of such actions has led to a shift toward nonstructural solutions for flood prevention and drainage. Nonstructural water management offers exceptional opportunities for complementary greenway development and recreation use. We should continue to encourage consideration of nonstructural alternatives whenever possible.

I have advocated a stepped-up department aquaculture program, both in research and in technology transfer, to help small farmers produce an "alternative crop," and to reduce America's dependence upon imported fish. You have been helping farmers with fish farming enterprises and farm ponds for years. Several SCS biologists have become recognized authorities on aquaculture.

Bill Hougart, the aquaculture coordinator for the department, predicts that fish farming and other forms of aquaculture will expand substantially in the next two decades, and so will the SCS role in it.

I anticipate that you will give aquaculture the imagination and encouragement it deserves. It can make productive use of lands that are not well suited to growing crops.

You should give the same imagination and encouragement to your field staffs and land users in:

- o Mitigating or avoiding adverse effects on wildlife from agricultural, forestry, and range management.

- o Protecting the public from any possible adverse effects of chemical herbicides, like 2,4,5-T.

- o Assessing the chances in our work to protect and enhance the beauty of America's landscape.

- o Helping identify and protect significant natural areas, important ecosystems, and historic places.

In asking your help in many challenges today, I have not lost sight of the continuing important challenge in conserving our essential, and irreplaceable soil resource.

President Carter said in this year's environmental message:

"Over the past half century we have invested more than \$20 billion of federal funds in efforts to conserve soil...yet in that same half century wind and water have removed half the fertile topsoil from nearly one-third of the nation's potentially usable croplands. The cost of replacing just the plant nutrients lost to erosion has been estimated at \$18 million a year...

"Our soil protection programs have undoubtedly prevented even worse soil loss, but we must do better to maintain the long-term productivity of the soil."

Secretary Bergland has expressed his concern about converting fragile lands to wheat production next year because there will be no set-aside requirement. The secretary wants to prevent land not traditionally used for crop production from being tilled.

We must tie down the soil that is unnecessarily washing and blowing. In addition, and with sensitivity to environmental consequences, we must help with water management practices on wet soils that are hazardous during part of the crop growing season. We must find solutions to the problems of soil compaction that are reducing productivity in many cultivated areas.

The soil--the land--undergirds every other conservation objective we have to ensure a continuous, sustained yield of plants, animals, water, energy, and services through production, harvest, and renewal.

Such an all-encompassing mission is formidable. Yet your record of past accomplishment is clear. I am convinced you will be even more effective in the 1980's.

I would also challenge you in two final areas.

First, I know I can count on your cooperation and enterprise in helping the department improve its hiring and career developmental record for minority and women professional employees.

Assistant Secretary Joan Wallace recently noted that of 1,778 soil conservationists in the department, less than 5 percent are black. Of 600 range conservationists, none are black. Of 876 economists, 85 are black.

Minorities and women may not be aware of career possibilities in department agencies. Yet Assistant Secretary Wallace suggests that student motivation and enrollment in the "right" majors are related to the realities of the marketplace. If employment prospects are bright, then incentives for recruitment and study are strong.

Let's work to exceed, not just meet, the goals being set by SCS and by the department's Office of Equal Opportunity.

Second, I am concerned about increased opportunities for added disciplines of new employees. I would like to see economists, sociologists, biologists, foresters and landscape architects receive equal consideration with agronomists and engineers in filling important line positions in your agency, including the leadership of watershed planning teams. You still need to recruit--and promote--a broader array of talent before SCS is truly a multidisciplinary agency.

I know that some specialists are leery of accepting a job outside their discipline. They are afraid--occasionally with good reason--that they can't get back to their profession. We shouldn't penalize a man or woman for accepting a line position or aspiring to a leadership role. It should be a plus, not a minus, to gain experience outside a discipline. The professional employee should be a better economist, or irrigation engineer, or landscape architect as a result.

I have presented you this morning with many challenges and I ask for your continued help in developing and carrying out a broader mission for the Soil Conservation Service.

One important reason for Secretary Bergland's selection of Norm Berg as administrator is his sensitivity to the new and broader role that SCS can fulfill across the whole spectrum of conservation and resource management.

In areas where some people foresee risks, Norm Berg sees challenges. Where some see difficulties, Norm Berg finds opportunities. I have no doubt that Norm Berg is well qualified to lead you capably into the 1980's.

He is already helping SCS and the rest of the department through the first round of planning and alternative program development under the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act.

America needs a venturesome, hard-driving lead agency to guide the nation into a new era in natural resource conservation on nonfederal land. I personally pledge every effort to help SCS to be that lead agency, and I ask each of you in this room to join me in making that goal a reality in the 1980's.

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